

Do the Right Thing: Protect the Helpless

May 20, 2009

Imagine, if you can, living in a place so plagued by war and kidnapping that you have to walk up to 12 miles a day just to find a place to sleep at night that's safe. As Americans, I don't think we can fully grasp what that would be like. But, for thousands of children living in northern Uganda today, this is their daily commute. This is their life.

For fear of being abducted by rebel leader Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army, children living in rural homes and villages would walk to town centers to sleep where they could hope to be safe. The children were among the victims of a conflict that began in 1986, and that somehow still continues today in Uganda and neighboring countries.

Lacking support from the local population, Kony resorted to kidnapping children as young as 8 years old and conscripting them to his army. The children have been brutalized and forced to commit atrocities on fellow abductees and even siblings. The vicious initiations were meant to break the children's ties to their community and gain their loyalty to the LRA. More than 25,000 children have been abducted over the course of this 23-year conflict.

While many Americans first learned about this issue when they saw a film made by college-age students called Invisible Children, many more remain unaware of the violence and suffering happening half a world away. I was recently reminded of the severity of this situation when students in my hometown of Hays and the community of Sterling, Kansas, shared with me the latest news from this conflict.

In 2006, many were hopeful a peace agreement could be reached to allow a new generation of children to finally live a life free of fear. Although it appeared progress had been made, Kony refused to sign the final agreement in 2008, and instead escalated his attacks. Since then, the LRA has killed more than 1,000, including more than 200 on Christmas Day. The LRA has also abducted more than 450 children during this time.

A few weeks ago, concerned citizens from around the world, in more than 100 cities, participated in an event called the Rescue to raise awareness about the conflict and call on their elected officials--people here in this House of Representatives--to take action. Two of these events were held in my home State--in Wichita and Kansas City.

I'm here today to join my voice with the voices of those that participated in the Rescue and to call on Congress to support efforts to end the violence and to rebuild shattered lives.

People look to the United States to defend those who cannot help themselves, to free the oppressed, and to champion the cause of freedom. This Congress can be the voice for those who have none.

As Brandon Nimz, a student at Fort Hayes State University, who is active in raising awareness about this issue, said in a recent letter to the editor, "In this time when the world does not look very kindly toward the United States, I believe we must show everyone that we're not driven solely by a need for power and influence--we do have a heart. Even though we will receive no political or economic gains by helping these defenseless villagers in the five affected African nations, it is the right thing to do."

Mr. Speaker and colleagues, tonight let us show that America does indeed have that heart. Please join me in doing the right thing by taking action to help this conflict and protect the helpless.